

To: JOSHUA LEDERBERG  
From: BOB MERTON

14 July 1987

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Josh,

Apropos your having identified the passage on 'premature discovery' in Taton, REASON & CHANCE IN SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY, p. 159 in the English translation of 1957. (When did the French original appear?) Your photocopy of the passage having been made available during that typical post-prandial session at your house following upon that familial dinner happily including Marguerite, David, Andrea and Annie.

Now, twelve hours later, I've retrieved my copy of the Taton book to see, in accord with my promise, whether I had taken note of that ¶ on premature discoveries and, if so, how. The result: more evidence of a propensity for personal cryptomnesia (though not of the pure variety for, at least, I had remembered having a copy of the book).

¶ The flyleaf (which may not photocopy well since my 1957 notes are in pencil) with my own index to the book does contain as its final entry a reference to "159-premature disc."

¶ My pencilled marginal note on p. 159 reads: "premature disc - ! good." The "!" tells all. My index is studded with such exclamation marks which mean: "Well. RT has noted this phenomenon too!" or, probably in better explication: "MiGod, RT has seen this pattern too!!" Anyway, this is clear indication to me that RT was not the original observer of the pattern; I was evidently quite familiar with it. Whether I had encountered early observations of it by others, which now seems likely, or had noted it ("prematurity") for myself, as is possible, I cannot say. An indefinitely large number of instances of personal cryptomnesia persuades me that undocumented memories have next-to-no evidentiary value.

¶ Scanning my copy of Taton further, I come upon a marginal note on p. 43 which reads, simply enough: "pre-maturity." The absence of further marginal comment suggests anew that the idea of pre-maturity -- a term not used by RT -- was not new to me.

¶ And as the final expression of cryptomnesia on my part: not only had I read the Taton book (on 5801:24) but had actually written a review of it for the ASR. I find a carbon copy of the typescript and FAX it to you forthwith. (From a published bibliography, I find that it appeared in the ASR, 1959, 24, 264.)

You will note that "premature discoveries" appears as an undiscussed item in the series of "patterns" discussed by RT. Since it is now evident to me that every one of those items in the series corresponded to my own prior interest in "patterns" to be found in scientific work and development -- hence all those exclamation marks in my pencilled index -- I infer, provisionally, and once again, that the notion as well as the phenomenon of 'prematurity' were not unfamiliar to me. Incidentally, RT does not himself refer either to 'patterns' or to 'prematurity' -- for whatever that observation is worth.

¶ Let's stay on the trail of the various phases of 'maturity'. Eventually, we'll come upon unambiguous evidence of the genesis